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SERBS

BY

SIR VALENTINE CHIROL

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SERBIA AND THE SERBS ¹

UNTIL the outbreak of the war Serbia was perhaps to most Englishmen little more than a name, and not a very acceptable name, for it was the worst pages of her history which chiefly clung to people's memory. It is not surprising, therefore, that, when Europe was suddenly threatened with a great conflagration of which Serbia was supposed to be the cause, Englishmen were inclined to visit upon her their horror and indignation. Gradually, as proofs accumulated that, whatever the demerits of Serbia, she had been used on this occasion merely as a stalking-horse for vast ambitions bent on war, a reaction set in and grew with every fresh report of her splendid gallantry in the field. It is proposed in these pages to tell as briefly as possible the story of Serbia and of the part her people have played throughout the course of events that have been leading up for many years past to the present catastrophe—a part that has been neither unimportant nor discreditable.

Serbia is one of the small States which grew up during the nineteenth century, in that part of South-eastern Europe commonly known as the Balkan Peninsula, out of the gradual disintegration of the Turkish Empire. Many hundred years ago, before the Turkish invasion of Europe, the Serbs, who are of Slavonic origin, formed for a time quite a powerful kingdom which attained its

¹ The term 'Serbs' is applied generally to the Slav population belonging to that family of the Slavonic race, whilst the term 'Serbians' is reserved specifically for those who inhabit the kingdom of Serbia.

zenith under their national hero, Stephen Dushan, towards the middle of the fourteenth century. But on June 15, 1389, the Sultan Amurath I overthrew, on the plain of Kossovo, a great Christian host consisting of Albanians and Hungarians as well as Serbs, and though the Sultan himself was slain by a Serb prisoner, Dushan's kingdom passed under the Turkish yoke. But the ecclesiastical self-government which the Turkish conquerors left, partly from a shrewd instinct of political expediency and partly from contempt, to the Christian races they subdued, helped the Serbs to maintain a sort of national existence even under Turkish misrule. They preserved their churches, their language, and their traditions. It was not, however, till nearly the close of the eighteenth century that they ventured to dream of reconquering their freedom, and—strange as it may seem to-day—it was under Austrian colours that bands of Serb volunteers first went forth to fight against Turkey. At last, in 1804, the Serbians rose in open revolt against Turkish oppression under a popular leader called Karageorge, or the Black George, whose descendant is to-day King Peter I of Serbia. Thus, they may claim to have been the real pioneers of Balkan independence. The struggle was a long and fierce one, and it was only in 1817 and after many terrible vicissitudes that Turkey agreed to recognize a certain measure of Serbian self-government whilst still retaining garrisons in the fortress of the Serbian capital, Belgrade, and other strong places. By the Treaty of Adrianople, after the Russo-Turkish war of 1827-9, which had completed the liberation of Greece, a few more districts were added to the self-governing Serbian province; and in 1867, after a succession of further risings, the Turks finally withdrew all their garrisons. Though still recognizing the nominal suze-

rainty of the Sultan, Serbia became henceforth a practically independent State.

By this time also, Serbia had begun to cultivate very close relations with the kindred people of Montenegro, a little mountain principality overlooking the Adriatic, which had practically never been subdued by the Turks, and was only separated from Serbian territory by a narrow strip of Turkish territory known as the Sanjak of Novi-Bazar. In spite of occasional jealousies between the two reigning families and a somewhat prolonged period of coolness when Serbia appeared to be falling under Austrian influence, the two States have acted together in almost every important crisis in South-eastern Europe. The total population of Montenegro to-day is only half a million, but her people are hardy mountaineers and splendid fighters, and have always enjoyed the special protection and goodwill of Russia. Prince Nicholas, who assumed the title of king in 1910 on the fiftieth anniversary of his accession to the throne, is one of the popular heroes of the Slav world, and, whilst two of his daughters have become Russian Grand Duchesses, another is married to the present King of Italy. The more aggressive the ambitions of the Germanic Powers have grown in South-eastern Europe, the more closely have Serbia and Montenegro drawn together in defence of their common interests.

But to go back to Serbia. Though a practically independent State since 1867, it was, and still is, a State which comprises but a very small portion of the territories inhabited by Serbs, Serbo-Croats, and other closely-related races, a large part of which were incorporated in the Austrian dominions as the tide of Turkish conquest in Eastern Europe retreated. Moreover, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and what was then called Old Serbia

to the south of self-governing Serbia, remained in 1867 and for many years after under Turkish rule, as also did the Bulgarian Slavs, who were only just beginning to make a name for themselves. But the practical independence to which the Serbians had attained made their State the rallying-point for the growing aspirations of those still outside the pale of freedom. So small a State obviously had to cast about for more powerful friends ; and, not unnaturally, it turned chiefly towards Russia, the one great Slav Power in Europe. When, in 1875, the populations of Bosnia and Herzegovina in their turn rose against Turkey, it was Serbia who, with Montenegro, first gave them material aid, and, in the summer of 1876, boldly went to war with Turkey on their behalf. Defeated by superior numbers, the Serbians were compelled after a gallant resistance to make peace, as Russia professed to be still confident that the Concert of Europe would succeed in imposing far-reaching reforms upon the Turkish Government. But under Lord Beaconsfield's administration, British distrust of Russia was largely responsible for the failure of the Conference which met at Constantinople in the following winter ; and the Russian armies took the field in the spring of 1877. Great Britain, dreading to see Constantinople in the hands of the Russians, saved Turkey from the worst consequences of military defeat. The Treaty of San Stefano, which the victorious Russians had imposed upon Turkey at the gates of Constantinople, was subjected to complete revision by the Congress of Berlin, and though Serbia had once more joined in the fray, the final settlement afforded her, beyond the recognition of her complete independence, very slender territorial compensation for the heavy sacrifices she had made in the common cause. Indeed, both at San Stefano and at Berlin, Russia

showed much more anxiety to promote the interests of the new Bulgarian Principality she had created than those of her sorely-stricken Serbian ally.

The bitter disappointment experienced by the Serbians created a great revulsion of feeling, and, at the instigation of Prince (afterwards King) Milan, Serbia turned away from Russia to Austria. For the next twenty years that prince was destined to play a most mischievous part in Serbian history. From the very beginning Serbia has been too often singularly unfortunate in her rulers. Greece, Rumania, and Bulgaria owe more than their people are often willing to admit, to their alien princes and to the powerful dynastic influences which those princes have enlisted at critical moments in favour of their adopted countries. Serbia chose her rulers amongst her own people, and few of them have proved worthy of their trust. The great patriot Karageorge had no sooner achieved the first emancipation of his country from Turkish rule than he was assassinated in 1817, and a member of the rival Obrenovitch family rose to power in his stead. Henceforth the domestic history of Serbia was constantly bound up with the deadly feuds of the Karagegevitches and the Obrenovitches and of the political factions which supported them. Prince Milan's immediate predecessor had been assassinated in Belgrade in 1868. Milan himself was the worst of all despots—a weak despot—whilst Serbia was nominally endowed with domestic institutions of the most advanced type, for which her people were still quite unfitted. Austria-Hungary found in him an all-too-willing tool, and throughout the greater part of his reign the Dual Monarchy was able to treat Serbia as a sort of Austro-Hungarian satrapy. It was at the instigation of Austria-

Hungary that in 1884 the Serbian armies fell upon Bulgaria in the rear at the very moment when Eastern Rumelia, as Southern Bulgaria was then called, having driven out her Turkish governor and proclaimed her union with Northern Bulgaria, was threatened with invasion by Turkey. Milan, who had exchanged the title of Prince for that of King in 1882, led his forces into Bulgaria, and it was largely through his incompetency and cowardice that they were hopelessly beaten after a three days' battle at Slivnitsa by the Bulgarians, who had the advantage of gallant and successful leadership in Prince Alexander of Battenberg. Milan's sordid quarrels with his eccentric consort, Queen Nathalie, and his repeated attempts to ride roughshod over the Constitution, did not end even with his abdication in 1889 any more than his intrigues with Vienna. Until his death in 1891 his nefarious influence persisted, sometimes behind the scenes, sometimes before the footlights, throughout the reign of his son, King Alexander, whose marriage with Madame Draga added another scandalous page to the history of his country.

The revolting brutality with which King Alexander and his consort were murdered by a band of mutinous officers in 1903 sent a thrill of horror throughout Europe, from which the Serbian name has not yet recovered. That crime put an end to the Obrenovitch dynasty. King Peter I, who was then placed on the throne, belonged to the rival Karageorgevitch family. The regicides, whom King Peter hesitated for a long time to remove from his entourage, have been suspected in some quarters of having acted in the interests, if not with the connivance, of Russia; but Austria showed herself, at first at least, equally indifferent to the crime

they had perpetrated, and it was not until two and a half years later that the relations between Austria-Hungary and Serbia suffered, for quite other reasons, a marked change for the worse.

Even in Austrian history there are few more discreditable pages than the treatment of Serbia by her powerful neighbour during the quarter of a century which followed the Congress of Berlin. The Austrian hold upon Serbia during that period was twofold. There was first of all the personal subserviency of King Milan, whose extravagant vices made him to a great extent dependent upon Austrian subsidies; and there was the economic dependence of Serbia upon the markets of Austria-Hungary for the greater part of her import and export trade, for which there was scarcely any outlet in other directions. In 1905, Serbia attempted to find some relief by concluding a customs treaty with the neighbouring Principality of Bulgaria. Vienna replied by a merciless tariff war against Serbia, opprobriously termed by the Austrians the 'Pig War', because swine form a very important item of the Serbian export trade. This fresh turn of the economic thumbscrew, however, roused in Serbia a spirit of fierce revolt against Austro-Hungarian ascendancy, and, for the first time, she applied herself with great courage and resourcefulness to develop new channels of economic communication with the outer world. Politically, she drew once more nearer to Russia, and when, in 1908, Austria found, in the revolution at Constantinople, a long-sought-for pretext for definitely annexing the provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which she had occupied after the Congress of Berlin and administered ever since, Serbia as well as Montenegro appealed to Russia for help. The annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was not only held by

Serbians and Montenegrins alike to seal irrevocably the fate of their Slav kinsmen in those provinces, but the Serbians saw in it a direct menace to their independence, especially as, in collusion with Vienna, Bulgaria had seized the same opportunity to repudiate the last shadowy rights of sovereignty which the Sultan had until then retained over the Bulgarian Principality as well as over Bosnia and Herzegovina. None of the Great Powers was disposed to resist by force of arms the action either of Austria-Hungary or of Bulgaria, though in both cases the absence of any previous consultation constituted a flagrant breach of the international law of Europe. Russia, nevertheless, with the diplomatic support of Great Britain and of France, strongly pressed for some compensation for Serbia and Montenegro, and, though she was not then in a position to go to war, she did not altogether abandon her clients' claims until she found herself confronted with a scarcely veiled ultimatum, not from Austria-Hungary, but from Germany, who had gone out of her way to convert the support she was bound to give to her Austrian ally into a direct humiliation inflicted upon Russia. It was on that occasion that the German Emperor made his flaming speech about Germany's 'shining armour' which was never forgotten or forgiven in Petrograd.

This crisis marked a turning point in Serbia's fortunes. At Vienna and at Pesth there had been incessant talk about chastising Serbia. But for the pacific influence of the old Emperor, Francis Joseph, war would certainly have been declared against Serbia, and, in order to justify it, the Austrian Foreign Office had already prepared an anti-Serbian 'case' very similar to that which was produced a few weeks ago from Vienna. I shall refer to it again later. The military party had

discovered that the strategic roads down to Salonika and the Aegean Sea, the goal of Austro-Hungarian ambitions, lay through Serbian territory, and Serbia must, therefore, be got out of the way. At the same time Germany, who seemed to have lost her trump card at Constantinople with the dethronement of the 'Red Sultan', Abdul Hamid, was regaining her hold over the Young Turks. Under her sinister influence, the liberal professions of the first days of the Turkish revolution were repudiated, and Turkish oppression settled down more heavily than ever upon the Christian populations of Macedonia, whether Serbs or Bulgars or Greeks. Bitter as had been the rivalry between the small States of the Balkan Peninsula, they were compelled now, by a sense of common danger, to draw closer together. They formed themselves into a Balkan League for common defence, Serbia and Montenegro perhaps chiefly as a safeguard against Austria-Hungary, Greece and Bulgaria rather with an eye to Turkey. The welter in Macedonia grew worse and worse, and Turkey having been to some extent weakened by her war in Tripoli with Italy, though hostilities had never extended to the Turkish territories in Europe or in Asia, the Balkan States declared war in September 1912. Within a few weeks the Sultan's armies were defeated in all parts of European Turkey, and Constantinople itself was in danger. This result was a tremendous blow to both Austria-Hungary and Germany—and especially mortifying to the latter, as it was German officers who had reorganized and equipped the Turkish army. Thanks mainly to the unselfish efforts of this country, the war had, however, been localized; and lest worse things should befall her Turkish friends, Germany was as anxious as England to bring hostilities

to a close. At the Peace Conference held in London, the German Ambassador worked heartily with Sir Edward Grey to bring about a settlement, but for very different reasons. The Germanic Powers calculated that, once peace was signed with Turkey, the Balkan League would destroy itself. And the League very nearly did this. The old jealousies between the Balkan States broke out afresh, especially between Serbia and Greece on the one hand, and Bulgaria on the other, in regard to the division of Macedonia. None displayed much moderation, but it was the inordinate ambition of King Ferdinand of Bulgaria which precipitated the final rupture. Serbia was ready to refer the question at issue to the arbitration of the Tsar; but, secretly prompted from Vienna and from Berlin, and relying upon the splendid achievements of his army against the Turks, King Ferdinand rejected the Russian offer and rushed into war against his recent allies. Again the hopes of Austria-Hungary and of Germany were frustrated. The Balkan League, it is true, was shattered for the time being, but it was Bulgaria who was beaten, and Serbia, the client of Russia, who, with Greece, emerged triumphant from this second ordeal. Rumania, too, though not a party to the first Balkan war and suspected until then of strong leanings towards the Germanic Powers, had on this occasion entirely thrown off their influence and brought decisive military pressure to bear upon Bulgaria.

The attitude of Austria-Hungary towards Serbia grew more and more menacing. Not only had Serbia proved herself a fighting Power of no mean value; not only had she, under the Treaty of Bucharest which closed the second Balkan War, nearly doubled her territory and added more than 50 per cent. to her

population, which now numbers about four and a half millions,—but her prestige amongst the Slav populations of the Hapsburg dominions had risen exceedingly. By sheer misgovernment Vienna and Pesth had driven the two chief Slav races in the southern provinces of the Monarchy, the Croats and the Serbs, to draw closer together, in spite of the denominational and other differences which tended to keep them apart—the Croats, numbering over three millions, being mostly Roman Catholics, whilst the Serbs, numbering nearly two millions, belong to the Orthodox Eastern Church. Croats and Serbs were equally exposed to official persecution, they were equally robbed of their liberties, they were thrown into the same prisons. They joined hands in a common spirit of revolt, and in common they put their faith in their Serbian kinsmen. To such an appeal the population of the Serbian kingdom could not but respond, and the Serbian authorities themselves, even if they had wished to, could not have stemmed a movement which was directed more or less openly to the emancipation of all the Southern Slav provinces of the Monarchy from the Austro-Hungarian yoke. The attitude of Serbia towards the southern Slavs of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy resembled more and more that of the little kingdom of Piedmont, fifty years ago, towards the other Italian States struggling for unity and freedom. The Russian Minister in Belgrade, of a very active and rather unscrupulous type not uncommon amongst Russian diplomatists, made no secret of his sympathies with this movement, which at Vienna and even more at Pesth began to be regarded as a serious danger to the Monarchy. Germany was only indirectly affected, but the ascendancy of Austria-Hungary in the Balkan Peninsula was essential to

Germany's own ascendancy in Constantinople, upon which depended the success of her far-reaching schemes of expansion in Asia Minor and Mesopotamia. Behind Serbia loomed, or was supposed to loom, the spectre of Russian Pan-Slavism; and in Berlin, as well as in the Austrian and Hungarian capitals, the 'Russian peril' began to bulk large in Ministerial speeches as well as in inspired utterances of the press. Before the Balkan wars, moreover, the German Emperor had come to regard the Turkish army as a sure addition to his own armed millions in the event of a great European war. He could no longer do so with the same confidence after the Turkish defeats, and it was partly to redress the balance that a huge new Army Bill was introduced last year in Berlin. That, however, was not said in public, and during the parliamentary debates it was on French armaments and still more on the necessity of preparing for a great struggle against Russian Pan-Slavism that stress was chiefly laid by the German Chancellor and other official speakers. Austrian and Hungarian statesmen had Russia equally in their minds, but their talk was mainly of Serbia and of the chastisement which she was wantonly seeking at the hands of her mighty but long-suffering neighbour.

Such was the position when, on June 28 last, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Hapsburg throne, and his consort were murdered in the streets of Serajevo, the capital of Bosnia. There are many mysterious features about that tragedy. His death certainly did not serve any Southern Slav interests, for, however great and dangerous his ambitions, he is known to have been quite out of sympathy with the short-sighted policy of repression which had hitherto found favour in Vienna and in Pesth, where, for various

reasons, he had many enemies in extremely influential quarters. The absence of all the most elementary precautions for his safety during the visit to Serajevo, though according to the Austrians themselves the whole of Bosnia was honeycombed with sedition, is an awkward fact which has not hitherto been explained. And there are others. The actual murderers, however, were unquestionably Serbs, though Austro-Hungarian subjects; and neither public nor official opinion in the Dual Monarchy required any further proof that the crime was what they wanted it to be, namely, part of a vast conspiracy hatched in Serbia with the connivance of Serbian officials, if not of the Serbian Government, against the safety of the Dual Monarchy. The cry for the chastisement of Serbia was now fierce and universal, and the sovereign's reluctance to embark in his old age upon fresh warlike adventures was at last overborne by the duty which it was urged he owed to the memory of his murdered nephew. Nevertheless, the Austro-Hungarian Government kept its own counsel to the last. The only person to whom was confided the secret of the impending stroke was the German Ambassador, Baron von Tschirschky, who enjoyed in an exceptional degree the confidence of William II. The German Foreign Office, as it has since admitted, had given Austria a free hand, and neither asked for nor wanted details. On July 23 the Austro-Hungarian Government flung an ultimatum at Serbia demanding, in effect, such a surrender of her independence as no sovereign State, however puny, could ever be expected to agree to, and demanded it within forty-eight hours. Mr. Lloyd George has described in burning and yet absolutely accurate terms this episode, without a parallel in modern history:

What were the Austrian demands? She sympathized with her fellow countrymen in Bosnia. That was one of her crimes. She must do so no more. Her newspapers were saying nasty things about Austria. They must do so no longer. That is the Austrian spirit. You had it in Zabern. How dare you criticize a Customs official, and if you laugh it is a capital offence. The colonel threatened to shoot them if they repeated it. Serbian newspapers must not criticize Austria. I wonder what would have happened had we taken up the same line about German newspapers. Serbia said: 'Very well, we will give orders to the newspapers that they must not criticize Austria in future, neither Austria, nor Hungary, nor anything that is theirs.' Who can doubt the valour of Serbia when she undertook to tackle her newspaper editors? She promised not to sympathize with Bosnia, promised to write no critical articles about Austria. She would have no public meetings at which anything unkind was said about Austria. That was not enough. She must dismiss from her Army officers whom Austria should subsequently name. But those officers had just emerged from a war where they were adding lustre to the Serbian arms—gallant, brave, efficient. I wonder whether it was their guilt or their efficiency that prompted Austria's action. Serbia was to undertake in advance to dismiss them from the Army: the names to be sent on subsequently. Can you name a country in the world that would have stood that?

And what was the case on which Austria based her demands? It consisted solely of a series of charges supported by no evidence whatsoever, beyond statements ascribed to witnesses in the course of a secret inquiry conducted by the Austrian authorities themselves. And by whom had this case been drawn up? By the same Count von Forgach, notorious for his hatred of the Slavs, who had been Minister in Belgrade five years previously, at the time when another anti-

Serbian case that had been drawn up also to justify Austrian aggression, was proved before a reluctant Austrian tribunal to have consisted largely of forgeries, some of which were actually traced to the Austrian Legation over which Count von Forgach presided.

How, on the other hand, did Serbia face these outrageous demands ? Here again let me quote Mr. Lloyd George :

It was a difficult situation for a small country. Here was a demand made upon her by a great military Power who could put five or six men in the field for every one she could : and that Power supported by the greatest military Power in the world. How did Serbia behave ? It is not what happens to you in life that matters ; it is the way in which you face it. And Serbia faced the situation with dignity. She said to Austria : ' If any officers of mine have been guilty and are proved to be guilty I will dismiss them.' Austria said : ' That is not good enough for me.' It was not guilt she was after, but capacity.

Then came Russia's turn. Russia has a special regard for Serbia. She has a special interest in Serbia. Russians have shed their blood for Serbian independence many a time. Serbia is a member of her family, and she cannot see Serbia maltreated. Austria knew that. Germany knew that, and Germany turned round to Russia and said : ' I insist that you shall stand by with your arms folded whilst Austria is strangling your little brother to death.' What answer did the Russian Slav give ? He gave the only answer that becomes a man. He turned to Austria and said : ' You lay hands on that little fellow, and I will tear your ramshackle empire limb from limb.' And he is doing it.

As a matter of fact, when Austria saw that Russia was in earnest, she was for a moment disposed to relent, and conversations had been actually resumed between

Vienna and Petrograd, and not altogether without some prospect of success, when Germany interposed with her own ultimatum to Russia, followed within twelve hours with the declaration of war which started the great European conflagration. This is the story of the share that Serbia has had in the European crisis. We ourselves are not fighting for Serbia, nor should we ever have fought for Serbia, since we were never under any obligation to fight for interests so far removed from our own. But we have no reason to feel ashamed that we are now fighting on the same side with her against a common enemy. Her history may not, indeed, be unblotted, but the splendid pluck with which her sons have faced the Austrian Goliath and smitten him hip and thigh would have wiped out even worse blots, and the cause for which she is fighting is to-day the same cause for which we are all fighting—the cause of freedom.

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